DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 332 147 CS 010 287

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TITLE Assessing Reading Comprehension through Writing: The Development of an Informal Evaluation Instrument.
PUB DATE May 90
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (35th, Atlanta, GA, May 6-11, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Freshman Composition; Higher Education; High Schools; *Reading Achievement; *Reading Comprehension; Reading Skills; Reading Tests; Reading Writing Relationship; Student Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS Main Idea; *Summarization

ABSTRACT

In an effort to evaluate comprehension skills with a "real world" task, students were asked to summarize and respond to an excerpt from a college freshman textbook. The written responses of a group of both high school students (n=100) and college students (n=51) were analyzed through a checklist developed to assess students' understanding of the main ideas and significant details. Students' papers were also checked for inclusion of material extrinsic to the text and the general readability of their writings. The preliminary examination of the papers enabled a revision of the checklist to include greater specificity. The format was changed to machine-scorable multiple choice, and the instrument is being used as an informal method to assess students' skills. (Figures consisting of a sample scoring instrument and a placement item for the supplemental reading test are included.) (Author/KEH)

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Assessing Reading Comprehension through Writing: The Development of an Informal Evaluation Instrument

by

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ABSTRACT

In an effort to evaluate comprehension skills with a "real world" task, students were asked to summarize and respond to an excerpt from a college freshman textbook. The written responses of a group of both high school and college students were analyzed through a checklist developed to assess students' understanding of main ideas and significant details. Students' papers were also checked for inclusion of material extrinsic to the text and the general readability of their writings. The preliminary examination of the papers enabled a revision of the checklist to include greater specificity. The format was changed to machine-scorable multiple choice, and the instrument is currently being used as an informal method to assess students' skills.

Christine K. Hall and Cathy Wade Leist

ASSESSING READING COMPREHENSION THROUGH WRITING: THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN INFORMAL EVALUATION INSTRUMENT

Standardized tests are probably the most commonly used instruments for assessing reading comprehension. Webb (1983) refers to their widespread use in providing his scale for evaluating standardized reading tests. Although standardized tests provide a valuable source of information about students' skills, they have definite limitations. Students usually read comparatively short passages and select answers from multiple-choice options which may themselves influence their understanding. Students may choose a correct answer without reference to the text at all, or may not be able to reflect their comprehension within the confines of the multiple-choice format. The timed nature of most of these tests may also lower scores for some students.

Other methods of assessment can be used to supplement the information provided by a standardized test. Methods such as retelling a story or summarizing a passage offer alternate ways to help assess comprehension not easily measured by standardized instruments. In these methods, students are able to construct and communicate their understanding without the restrictions of directed questions and answers (Pugh Smith and Jackson, 1985).

In order to gain insight into students' comprehension, we decided to utilize a "real world" task and asked students to summarize and re-

spond to a 1500 word excerpt from a college freshman textbook. Students were free to mark the text and to look back at the selection as they chose. From an analysis of their responses, we eventually developed a protocol for use in evaluating summary writing.

The original group of students consisted of 51 college students taking freshman composition. Because we were also involved in assessing the readiness for college of a group of high school students, we also included approximately 100 high school students in the sample. A study skills instructor worked with a sociology instructor to choose a passage that they considered representative from a textbook currently in use. Students were asked to read the selection and write a summary and comments. A very general prompt was used to allow students to make their own decisions concerning what to relate about meaning.

In a first attempt to analyze the writings, a checklist was developed based on a model for evaluating retellings (Valencia, 1986). Reading instructors had outlined the passage, and students'writings were checked for inclusion of topic, thesis, main ideas and significant details. The students'papers were also judged as to the inclusion of material not directly related to the content of the passage (supplementations) and critically evaluative statements. A holistic judgment about a student's writing in terms of completeness, structure, and readability was also attempted.

In analyzing the written responses of high school and college students, several general tendencies were observed. A few students in both the high school and college groups chose not to attempt a summary at all but instead wrote pure supplementations. They usually elaborated on the topic itself with personal examples or made judgmental statements about the topic. Most college readers (59%) recognized the complete thesis of the passage, while very few (9%) of the high school students recognized the complete major organizing thesis. The majority of both high school (58%) and college (59%) students generalized beyond the text to their own experiences or opinions. Approximately 20% of the college students wrote good critical evaluations, while none of the high school students were judged able to do so.

The preliminary examination of the papers generated a revision of the checklist. For example, by looking at how the students had marked the text, items were constructed for use of some study skills. Distinctions and degrees could also be indicated. The area of supplementations was specified to include opinions, experiences, and degree of critical evaluation. Judging the readability of a student's paper was facilitated by the addition of items for handwriting, surface error, and use of outline form instead of use of continuous text. A holistic judgment about the complete response was also added.

Because of the excellent diagnostic information specific to reading a college-level textbook derived from this method, we decided to use the

summary writing as a supplementary test for students in college developmental reading classes. The scoring instrument was refined yet a third time to better meet our needs. Instead of the checklist form, a multiple choice format was developed. This format allowed computer scoring for easier scanning and recording of scores. Changes were made in several items. "Thesis" became "controlling generalization," more appropriate for expository textbook form. Under content of the summary, changes were made to provide a complete outline of the textbook excerpt showing more comprehensively how complete or incomplete the student's summary was. Options for each item of the summary (each main idea and each detail) were made generic so that this form could be used with different contents as textbook selections were changed for a posttest or from year to year. Supplementations were separated to better report the use of student comments or student evaluations. A vocabulary item was included to report the students' use of their own words or their restructuring of text language. "Readability" and "handwriting" were treated as separate items apart from form. Having made these changes to provide more specific information, a "comments" section was deleted. Finally, in order to offer suggestions for improvement to students, six items related to instructional needs were included in the scoring instrument. (See Figure 1).

An additional protocol was developed for a holistic scoring of responses. The summary writing task was assigned to 185 students enrolled in three levels of developmental reading and study skills

courses, and the responses were analyzed with the computer-scoring instrument. Although there was some overlap, the responses of the students in each of the three levels displayed similar characteristics. An evaluative number was assigned to each set of characteristics. This holistic view of the characteristics of the developmental college students' papers then became a scoring portocol that could be used to indicate placement in developmental reading courses. (See Figure 2.) A future task is to correlate holistic scoring placements with the placements from a standardized reading test.

In conclusion, the results of our efforts have reinforced the belief that the use of assessments such as the written summary response yield additional and useful information about students' skills. The computer- scorable protocol standardizes the procedure to some extent and makes the results more accessible to students and their instructors.

Pugh Smith, S. and Jackson, J. (1985). Assessing reading/learning skills with written retellings. JOURNAL OF READING, 28, 622-630.

Valencia, S. (1986). Checklist for judging richness of expository retellings. Center for the Study of Reading. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Webb, M.W. II (1983). A scale for evaluating standardized reading tests, with results for Nelson-Denny, Iowa, and Stanford. JOURNAL OF READING, 26, 424-429.

NOTE

The authors acknowledge the Jefferson County Public Schools/University of Louisville Coordinating Committee and the Xerox Foundation for their support of the Academic Skills Assessment and Intervention Program which provided part of the impetus for this project.

FIGURE 1

SAMPLE SCORING INSTRUMENT FOR SUPPLEMENTAL READING TEST

DIAGNOSTIC EVALUATION

TOPICS

A. omitted
B. mentioned

CONTROLLING GENERALIZATION

F. omitted
G. unrelated to textbook reading
H. incomplete for textbook reading
J. complete for textbook reading

CONTENT OF THE SUMMARY

Main Idea

A. omitted
B. mentioned but incorrectly explained
C. mentioned but incomplete explanation
D. explained well

Significant Detail

A. omitted
B. mentioned but incorrectly explained
C. mentioned but incomplete explanation
D. explained well

USE OF TEXTBOOK CUES

F. order of ideas does not follow textbook organization
G. order of ideas follows textbook organization
H. used textbooks aids such as headings to organize ideas

USE OF TECHNICAL VOCABULARY

A. uses exact vocabulary from textbook incorrectly
B. paraphrases vocabulary from textbook incorrectly
C. uses exact vocabulary from textbook correctly
D. paraphrases vocabulary from textbook correctly

COMPLETENESS

F. discussion unrelated to textbook reading
G. used only details or vague general ideas to discuss textbook reading
H. inadequate discussion of textbook reading
J. adequate discussion of textbook reading

STUDENT'S COMMENTS

A. gives no information beyond the textbook
B. generalizes beyond the textbook with opinions
C. generalizes beyond the textbook with experiences
D. generalizes beyond the textbook with experiences and opinions

STUDENT'S EVALUATION

F. gives no information beyond the textbook
G. comments on the reading task itself
H. provides some critical evaluation
J. provides excellent critical evaluation

STRUCTURE

A. no appropriate form attempted
B. used outlining or notetaking form only
C. attempted to use summary form
D. good summary form

READABILITY

F. degree and kind of surface error affects readings
G. little surface error, does not hinder reading

HANDWRITING

A. difficult to read
B. not difficult to read

INSTRUCTION NEEDED

Understanding technical vocabulary.
F. yes
G. not appropriate at this time
H. no.

Paraphrasing technical vocabulary.
A. yes
B. not appropriate at this time
C. no

Recognizing main ideas and significant details.
F. yes
G. not appropriate at this time
H. no

Understanding relationships between ideas.
A. yes
B. not appropriate at this time
C. no

Summarizing.
F. yes
G. not appropriate at this time
H. no

Organizing and logical presentation.
A. yes
B. not appropriate at this time
C. no

Figure 2

SAMPLE
PLACEMENT ITEM FOR SUPPLEMENTAL READING TEST

Rank

6 . . . .May have incomplete or complete generalization. Explains main ideas and major details well from all three headings.
Uses summary form
Uses exact vocabulary or paraphrasing from the reading correctly
Provides response beyond the textbook

5 . . . .May have incomplete generalization/no generalization
Explains main ideas and major details well from two headings
Clear relationships between main ideas and details
Uses exact vocabulary or paraphrases from the reading correctly
Usually provides response beyond the textbook

4 . . . .No generalization
May use outline or topical form only
Explains main ideas and major details from two headings
Uses exact vocabularly correctly
May or may not provide response beyond the textbook

3 . . . .Explains only some main ideas or major details
No separation of ideas in headings/or uses headings to section
May paraphrase incorrectly
May or may not provide response beyond the textbook (When response is provided may match summary in length.)

2 . . . .Explains only a few main ideas and major details
Uses only outline or topical form
May over-generalize
Difficult to understand the relationships between ideas or to understand the ideas
May use exact vocabulary incorrectly

1 . . . .Response only
May give one general idea and respond
Ideas presented may be difficult to understand

0 . . . .No writing